



16-year-old Mrinalini Somani started the WE concert to help underprivileged children.

FOR THE LOVE OF MUSIC

In its fifth year now, a charity music concert put together by Mumbai teenager **Mrinalini Somani** is a true testament to the power of music in bringing people together

By Shikha Kumar

Tonight, Mumbai's Royal Opera House, which has played host to some of the world's most accomplished performers since the time it reopened last year after a formidable restoration process, will provide a stage to artists of a different kind. Seventy students from across Mumbai, from 13 schools and including underprivileged kids from the slums of the city, will belt out songs by Whitney Houston, Bruno Mars, Adele and Shawn Mendes, perform dances and play a multitude of instruments to an audience of nearly 500 people.

The brainchild of 16-year-old Mrinalini Somani, WE 2017 brings together school students between the ages of 13 and 18, along with those from the Salaam Bombay Foundation, an organisation that empowers and educates children from the city's slums.

"We've been practising for three months and to perform at the Royal Opera House feels so overwhelming," says Somani. Dressed in a black T-shirt with the slogan 'Here comes treble' and strumming a semi-acoustic guitar, the teenager proceeds to perform a rendition of Adele's *Chasing Pavements*, reaching the high notes with impres-

sive ease. It's almost hard to believe when she confesses that she was a shy kid. Somani has been spearheading WE for five years now.

SHINING LIGHT

In 2013, the teenager was performing at the Sangit Kala Kendra in Mumbai as part of a programme centred around 100 years of Bollywood, when she interacted with some of the other artistes who happened to be children from the Salaam Bombay Foundation.

"It was incredible meeting them and to see how talented and passionate they were. I came home and told my mom that I wanted to do something to help them out," she recalls. Then in the seventh grade, Somani, a keen musician herself, came up with the idea of a concert that would use music to nurture talent as well as foster the welfare of these underprivileged kids.

She bounced the idea off her batchmates, who readily agreed, and the first WE concert was held in September 2013 at The Blue Frog, with 22 participants performing a mix of jazz, rock and pop, and contemporary styles. The numbers only grew since then, and this year, WE opened the

audition process to schools around the city.

"Apart from the dances and regular performances, we have some crazy fusion pieces, like with a tabla and keyboard; saxophone and drums and more," says Somani, who'll be performing *Chasing Pavements*.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The participants received training from some of Mumbai's best, including drummer Yohan Marshall who used to be a faculty member at True School of Music and is their band director. "Often, people aren't exposed to different styles of music, but they have great voice texture. Yohan has not just polished their skills, he's also taught everyone to experiment.

And since he also plays the guitar and bass, he can listen to every instrument separately and instantly pick out what's going off," adds Somani, who started learning Indian classical music at the age of five. Over the years, her interest in Western music developed and she made the switch.

When you interact with students whose social dynamics may be different from your own, it can be a humble learning experience. Somani discovered that the Salaam Bombay Foundation students were practising their dance skills for up to three hours every day, including difficult routines like backflips, pyramid formations and more.

"While scheduling the rehearsals this year, I realised how difficult people can be. They have tournaments, assignments and other school responsibilities while the Salaam Bombay

kids would turn up no matter what. It made me realise that we often take these opportunities for granted, and they don't," she says.

Somani is leaving for England by the end of the month for further studies, but hopes to be actively involved in planning WE's concert over her summer break next year. "Maybe we can have students from my new school performing next year. It's great what music can do to bring people together," she says.

brunchletters@hindustantimes.com
Follow @HTBrunch on Twitter



Stills from previous performances at the WE Concert



70 students from across Mumbai will belt out songs by Whitney Houston, Bruno Mars, Adele and Shawn Mendes

